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VITRUVIUS' ACCOUNT

OF THE

GREEK STAGE

BY

LOUIS DYER

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VITRUVIUS' ACCOUNT OF THE GREEK STAGE.

An interesting contrast may be drawn between the results obtained from the study of Vitruvius in the early years of the sixteenth century and the exposition of his meaning and text by the scholars of to-day. This contrast is almost always to the advantage of the latter-day scholars. Archaeology has done everything in recent times to clear up by consideration of existing monuments a host of difficulties not dreamed of in the days of the Renaissance, and archaeologists—so far as they are agreed as to the testimony of recent discoveries—have little or nothing to learn from remote predecessors. But a serious disagreement exists among them in regard to the stage of the Greek theatre. This want of agreement is reflected in the current interpretations of a difficult passage in Vitruvius. About this very passage the scholars of the early Renaissance were agreed, and since their explanation of it differs in some material respects from any now offered, it may be of some use to us to-day.

The Florentine Leo Battista Alberti[1] reproduced the meaning of Vitruvius, without undertaking to construe his text, then very corrupt. In 1511 was printed the text of Vitruvius which, in spite of many subsequent labours, has bravely held its own up to the present day. This text we owe to Fra Giocondo,[2] a Franciscan friar who was equally great as an inspiring teacher, a painstaking scholar, and a daring and original architect.[3] The condition of the text in the three first editions was lamentable, as appears in the passage describing the Greek theatre which especially concerns the present inquiry. The second (1496) and the third (1497) both reproduce an absurd and confusing printer's blunder made in the first (1484-1492), and all

[1] See his *De re aedificatoria*, posthumously published, Florence 1485, passim.

[2] M. Vitruvius per Iocundum solito castigatior factus cum figuris et tabula ut iam legi et intelligi possit...Impressum Venetiis ac magis q̃ unquam alio tempore emendatum: sumptu mira q̃ diligentia Ioannis de Tridino alias Tacuino. Anno Domini. M.D.XI. Die. xxii. Maii Regnante inclyto Duce Leonardo Lauredano. Dedicated to Pope Julius II.

[3] On his teaching see note (17) below. His scholarship is known by his *editio princeps* of Pliny's *Letters*, by his remarkable elucidations of Caesar's *Commentaries*, published at Venice (1517), reprinted by Giunta (1520) at Basle (1521) and finally in a sumptuous folio, Paris (1543.) See for his pains in collecting MSS. the dedication of this work to Giuliano de' Medici. Also he there speaks of a meeting of scholars at Venice where his text was discussed in detail. His architectural abilities caused him to be employed by the Emperor Maximilian, Louis XII. of France, Pope Leo X. and the Venetian Republic.

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three leave uncorrected the copyist's blunder which defaces the MSS. and must be discussed below. These confusions, added to its real difficulty, made this passage a byword from the first. Budé[4] refers to Vitruvius on the theatre, and then, not without a touch of grim humour, he adds: "But not every man can go to Corinth, the proverb says."

The diagram and sketch-plan now redrawn by the kindness of Mr. R. W. Schultz and published on a slightly reduced scale will be found in the folio edition of Vitruvius, Venice 1511, on pp. 52 *verso* and 53 *recto*. The same reappear much reduced in size in the octavo reprint (1523)[5] of the Florentine revision published by Giunta in 1513.[6]

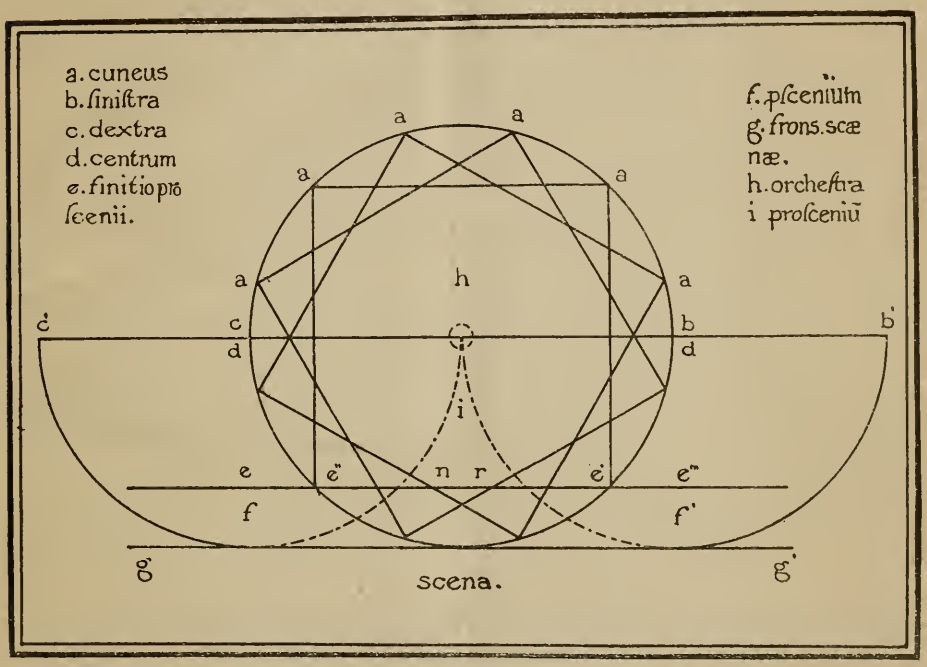

DIAGRAM.

On the diagram the two arcs drawn in black are Fra Giocondo's, and will be explained later on. For the present I substitute for them a continuation which is shown in the black-dotted lines *o n f* and *o r f'* (*o* = the centre, *n*

[4] See his Annotationes in Pandectas, under the rubric "ex lege Athletas."

[5] M. Vitruvii de architectura libri decem, summa diligentia recogniti atq: excusi. This is a reprint of the 1513 octavo, both being dedicated in identical terms to Guiliano de' Medici. But the plan and diagram for the Greek theatre is taken in the 1523 edition, not from its exemplar of 1513, but from the 1511 edition.

[6] Vitruvius iterum et Frontinus a Iucundo revisi repurgatique quantum ex collatione licuit. In this edition there is a revision of the marginal key to Fra Giocondo's diagram of 1511 which was abandoned in the latest edition (1523).

and r = intersections with $e\,e'''$). These are required alike by the sketch-plan and the diagram of Fra Giocondo, as well as by his text of Vitruvius.

The use of paraphrase and digression in explaining this passage is clearly justified, but might not be necessary in the present case if Fra Giocondo himself had explained his plan and diagram instead of leaving them simply confronted by the Vitruvian text which runs as follows:—

In Graecorum theatris non omnia iisdem rationibus sunt facienda, quod primum in ima circinatione, ut in Latino trigonorum iiii, in eo quadratorum trium anguli circinationis lineam tangunt, et cuius quadrati latus est proximum scaenae praeciditque curvaturam circinationis ea regione designatur finitio proscaenii. et ab ea regione ad extremam circinationem curvaturae parallelos linea designatur, in qua constituitur frons scaenae, per centrumque orchestrae a proscaenii regione parallelos linea describitur et qua secat circinationis lineas dextra ac sinistra in cornibus hemicyclii centra signantur, et circino conlocato in dextro ab intervallo sinistro circumagitur circinatio ad proscaenii *dextram* partem. item centro conlocato in sinistro cornu ab intervallo dextro circumagitur ad proscaenii *sinistram* partem. ita tribus centris hac descriptione ampliorem habent orchestram Graeci et scaenam recessiorem minoreque latitudine pulpitum, quod λογεῖον appellant, ideo quod eo tragici ac comici actores in scaena peragunt, reliqui autem artifices suas per orchestram praestant actiones itaque ex eo scaenici et thymelici graece separatim nominantur, eius logei altitudo non minus debet esse pedum x., non plus duodecim, *De Architectura*, V. viii.

The explanation of the above suggested by Fra Giocondo's diagram and sketch-plan is indeed unavoidably complicated to-day by what seems to me its misconception in the Vitruvian commentaries that have appeared since 1511-1523. Having fixed upon the situation of the scena, ($g\ g'$ in the diagram, f in the sketch-plan), we are required to describe a circumference, as shown in the diagram. Then we must inscribe three squares,—only one of which concerns the present inquiry,—and let $e\ e'$ the side lying next the scena,[7]—Green-room building it may be called,—be the *finitio proscenii.* By this is meant the forward boundary line ending the proscenium space, marked $f\ f'$ on the diagram.

The sense attached by Fra Giocondo to proscenium here is given by his townsman and enthusiastic pupil[8] as follows:—

'That space on either side of the pulpitum reaching to the forward wall of the scena (ad extremam scenam) which was left vacant was called by the Greeks Proscenium. Let no man opine that here were the sides of the *scena.*'

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[7] σκηνή or *scena* had various meanings. Used strictly, in a context where the other parts of the stage-building are explained, it has usually the most primitive of its meanings as here. The stricter and earlier meaning of προσκήνιον, or *proscenium*, corresponded to this meaning of *scena*, and designated a mask which screened the *scena* from view. There might or might not lie between a vacant space (as in Fra Giocondo's diagram). See Dr. J. Sommerbrodt, *De Aeschyli re scenica*, part II. (1851) and III. (1858). See also his *Scaenica collecta*, 1876.

[8] Julii Caesaris Scaligeri, 'De Comoedia ac Tragoedia' in vol. iii. of Gronovius' *Thesaurus* (1699).

But the *finitio proscenii* was a part of the proscenium, and was far more important than the useless space behind it. To this *finitio proscenii*, without reference to Scaliger's vacant space, applies Perrault's definition: 'Le Proscenium estoit la face de la scène qui estoit ornée de colonnes.'[9] Fra Giocondo's Greek proscenium, then, was a narrow unused space in front of the scena, bounded by a row of columns which stood on the line marked *finitio proscenii* on his diagram. To this *finitio proscenii* would apply, I think, the definition of the Greek proscenium sometimes given on the authority of Dr. Dörpfeld to-day.[10] But there is a difference, for Fra Giocondo interrupts this line of columns by the forward projection of the pulpitum (λογεῖον). Moreover, for reasons to be entered into below, he indicates in front of the *finitio proscenii* a second proscenium which is clearly that of the Roman theatre and need not here be taken into account. It may be added that the forward projecting stage (λογεῖον) is spoken of by Bulengerus and by Scaliger as a part of the orchestra. Their plain meaning is that it projected into the orchestra from the forward line of the *proscenium*. Scaliger also says that this stage was always of wood and removable.

Returning now to Vitruvius, the second line which he requires to be drawn is *g g'* tangent to the circle and parallel to the *finitio proscenii* just drawn. This line is the *frons scenae*, and separates the scena from the unused space in front. Vitruvius next requires us to draw a third line parallel to the two others, which shall pass through the centre of the orchestra. This third line is a diameter, as all now agree, for schemes like Rode's second, Schoenborn's and Albert Mueller's first[11] have been finally condemned. Vitruvius now requires us to use two new centres, *b* on the spectators' left, and *c* on the right. Put your compass, Vitruvius says, at *c* (on the playgoer's right), measure off the radius toward his left, and then describe the arc *o n* cutting *e e'' n*, the right hand portion of the proscenium—*ad proscenii dextram partem.*

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[9] *Abrégé des dix livres d'Architecture de Vitruve*, Paris, 1674, and 1681. An Italian translation appeared in 1747, and English ones in 1692, 1703 and 1729. Perrault makes nowhere any attempt to reconcile this definition with his very different account of the Greek proscenium in his two translations, Paris, 1673 and 1684.

[10] If I rightly understand Dr. Dörpfeld's view, which he has kindly communicated to me, he regards the *finitio proscenii* as the forward line of the *proscenium*, then the *proscenii pulpitum*—on this phrase see note (16) below—is the λογεῖον built in front of this line. So far he agrees substantially with Fra Giocondo. But, according to Dr. Dörpfeld, the *proscenium* was at the same time the mask-front or façade of the *scena*, and also—because of the interval between it and the masked scena—a second λογεῖον, *i.e.* the θεολογεῖον. This last, he supposes, was confused by Vitruvius with the λογεῖον pure and simple. Dr. Dorpfeld thinks that Vitruvius gives a correct plan with the right names attached to its component parts, but is led into the confusion above noted by misunderstanding the way in which plays had been represented. The Greek authors at his command took for granted the distinction between λογεῖον and θεολογεῖον, and therefore did not explain it, Dr. Dörpfeld thinks.

[11] See Rode's *Kupfer zu Vitruv's zehn Bücher* &c. Berlin 1801, Schoenborn's is in the *Zeitschrift für Alterthums Wissenschaft* 1853 (Nos. 40 and 41), Albert Mueller's first is in the *Philologus* (1863) vol. xxiii. The common feature of them all is their attempt to distinguish between the *centrum orchestrae* and the centre of the circle originally drawn. This, as A. Mueller has himself shown, contradicts the plain meaning of Vitruvius.

Here following Marini's text of 1836, Rose and Mueller-Struebing correct all the MSS. and read *sinistram* for *dextram*. Fra Giocondo, whose reading I have italicized, gives with all the MSS. *dextram*.

Put your compass now, Vitruvius proceeds, at *h* on the playgoer's left, measure off the radius toward his right, and then describe the arc *c r* to *r c′ c′′*, the left hand portion of the proscenium—*ad proscenii sinistram partem*.

Here Fra Giocondo makes the correction which Marini and Rose think should be made above. They of course leave the MS. reading *dextram* uncorrected in this place. All admit that correction must be made in one place or the other. There is nothing in any MS. to justify either correction as against the other. The decisive reason which led Fra Giocondo to correct the second rather than the first *dextram* was plainly his understanding of the general architectural context, and he is the only great architect who was also a great scholar by whom this question has been debated. Rose and Marini on the other hand decided to change the first *dextram* and leave the second, because there had been much trouble in making any sense out of Fra Giocondo's text. This difficulty connected itself with controversial questions about right and left.[12] This will become clear by an examination of Rode's and Schoenborn's and Albert Mueller's plans already alluded to. The relief afforded by Rose's text, published in 1867, encouraged Wecklein to offer a new explanation, and Albert Mueller very soon recanted his first explanation and substituted a new one.[13] Indeed a very strong case might be made out in favour of Marini's text, if its adoption in Germany, which has been very general, had resulted in any explanation which commanded universal or even general assent. Unhappily the reverse is the case, as may be seen in the three last German Handbooks. In Hermann's *Lehrbuch* (1888), Baumeister's *Denkmaeler* (1888), and Iwan Mueller's *Handbuch* (1890), will be found three diagrams to fit this passage of Vitruvius. In each of these the arcs drawn from the right and left centres of Vitruvius produce results in regard to stage and orchestra not favoured by the other two.

The fact is that no one since Fra Giocondo has been able to make plain why Vitruvius attached so much importance to the drawing of the last two circles and Claude Perrault's criticism[14] applies to all subsequent attempts, including his own, at understanding their function. One exception should however be made in favour of Schneider.[15] Of these two circles then the first one drawn

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[12] See Marini's note on the passage, folio edition, Rome, 1836. 'At. . . . in sibimetipsis contradicentes pro dextero cornu intellexerunt prius dexteram manum spectatorum, deinde dexteram proscenii partem declaraverunt spectatorum sinistram. Non est credibile Vitruvium considerare voluisse eamdem rem in eodem loco sub duplici aspectu. Non secunda vox *dexteram* sed prima mutetur in *sinistram*.' For some of the accounts, like those of Gallianus and Polenus to which Marini alludes, see Lemonius' dissertation, St. Petersburg, 1850. He there criticizes five diagrams and gives a sixth of his own. Fra Giocondo had no difficulty whatever in dealing with right and left.

[13] For Wecklein's diagram see the *Philologus* 1871, p. 435 ff. of vol. xxxi. A. Mueller's first appeared in 1873, and is reproduced in Hermann's *Lehrbuch*.

[14] Perrault—the well-known architect of Colbert and Louis XIV.—says in a note to his translation: 'Le mystère de ces trois cercles est une chose bien obscure ou bien inutile.'

[15] G. K. W. Schneider's plan is in his 'Attisches Theaterwesen' 1835. It must be admitted that his stage has a most ridiculous

brings us, at its intersection with the *finitio proscenii*, to the right hand limit of the pulpitum, while the second brings us to the left hand limit of the same.

Returning now to the text, after thus drawing the circles with Fra Giocondo and Schneider, we find Vitruvius saying: 'Thus the Greeks obtain, by using three centres an orchestra that is roomier (*ampliorem*), a scena that lies further back (*recessiorem*), and a *pulpitum* or *logeion*, as the Greeks call it, which is narrower (*minore latitudine*).

Vitruvius thus requires us to refer to the Roman theatre and stage, and the comparison is made easy because the Roman stage is well understood to-day through existing remains. If comparison be made according to the requirements of Vitruvius the differences which he enumerates will all appear Only we must use the Roman stage as we know it rather than the Roman stage as Vitruvius describes it. This is because Vitruvius insists upon a feature in the Roman stage which he really borrows from the Greeks, namely the *pulpitum proscenii*. This is apparently an invention of Vitruvius, one of those 'refinements in practice not observed by his predecessors nor followed by his successors.'[16] The Roman Theatre was after all only a modified type of the Greek theatre changed to suit the New Comedy and thus adapted to the plays of Terence and Plautus. Applied to this type of theatre the words *scena* and proscenium have a new meaning. Scena takes the place of *proscenium*, and proscenium is applied to the pulpitum. Hence the comparison required by Vitruvius is between the pulpitum of the Greek and the pulpitum-proscenium, not the proscenii pulpitum, of the Roman theatre. The only thing which the *proscenii pulpitum* of Vitruvius can mean is a small temporary stage built on the centre of the larger and permanent proscenium-stage. And this is what Scaliger and Fra Giocondo make it out to be.

The closing words of Vitruvius on the Greek theatre sum up the results of the comparison just made. Just these differences, says our author, were forced on the Greeks because only their tragedians and comedians performed on the stage, whereas the others, the *artifices*, went through with their performance up and down the orchestra (*per orchestram*). This circumstance in fact leads the Greeks to distinguish the former as *scenici* from the latter whom they call *thymelici*. The height of the raised stage occupied by these tragici and comici must be, says Vitruvius, ten feet at least and twelve feet at most. And here ends that part of Vitruvius' account of the Greek theatre which concerns the stage. If we take the temporary wooden *pulpitum*, (*e*) on Fra Giacondo's sketch-plan, to have been ten or twelve feet above the orchestra-level, the difficulties are insurmountable. Accordingly we must either suppose with Dr. Dörpfeld that Vitruvius confused the λογεῖον with

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shape,—like that of a ship's prow,—but he uses the two circles last drawn to determine the position of the stage (λογεῖον), and so far agrees with Fra Giocondo: but Schneider is too much hampered by the *words* of Vitruvius and his details therefore are impracticable.

[16] Quoted from a review of Wilkins' Vitruvius in a MS. note to a Bodleian Vitruvius, Douce V. subt. 2. Compare on the *proscenii pulpitum* Perrault's shrewd remark that the phrase applies rather to the Greek than to the Roman theatre.

the θεολογεῖον, but only so far as the dimension of height was concerned, or we must believe[17] that our author had in mind such a theatre as that of Cuiculum (Djemila) where the level of the *orchestra* was considerably below that of the *scena*-floor. See Amable Ravoisié, *Exploration Scientifique de l'Algérie.* This last would not be a Greek theatre, but a transitional type, between the earlier Greek and the later or Roman theatre.

And now some account must be given first of the arcs *o n f* and *o r f'* which I have added in Fra Giocondo's diagram, second of the double proscenium which he provides, the Greek proscenium *f f'*, and the Roman proscenium *i*. I have regarded the departure of Fra Giocondo from Vitruvius' literal directions for drawing the second and third circles as a device for greater clearness in teaching.[18] In practice he found it less confusing to accomplish what Vitruvius had in mind by a method of his own: 'I will simplify the matter,' we can almost hear him say, when his pupils were dazed by the Vitruvian directions about a centre to the left, a radius to the right and an arc to the left, 'Take your centre at *b* to the *left*, measure off your radius toward the *left b'*, and from there describe your arc until you cut the *frons scenae* on the *left* at *f.'* Similarly take your other centre at *c*, on the *right*, measure off your radius toward *c'* on the *right*, and describe your arc until it touches the *frons scenae* at *f*, on the *right*. Produce both these arcs until they intersect the *finitio proscenii e e'' e' e'''*,—the matter is a simple one and I need not draw the arcs further. Now these two points (*r* and *n*) of intersection with *e'' e'*, are the limits to the right and left of the forward projecting *pulpitum* shown at *e* on my sketch-plan.'

My reason for thinking that Fra Giocondo's arcs were thus produced in thought by him is that the limits of the *pulpitum* are determined on his sketch-plan in the manner just described. If any doubter should object, then I should appeal to Vitruvius and, neglecting Fra Giocondo's arcs entirely, I should should draw *o n f* and *o r f'* according to the letter of Vitruvius' instructions. After that I should proceed as Fra Giocondo has done in his sketch-plan.

As for the introduction into his diagram of the Roman proscenium *i* in front of the *finitio proscenii*, behind which lies the Greek proscenium *f*, that can also be explained as a teacher's device to make plain the difference be-

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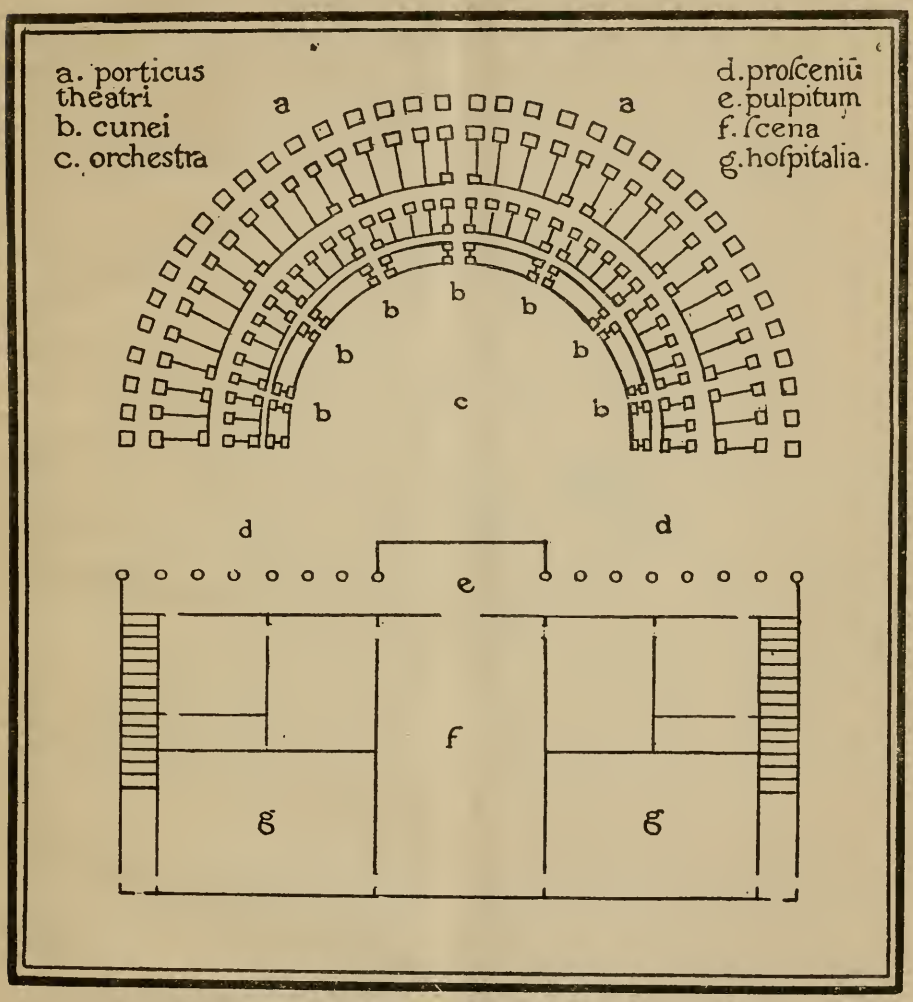
[17] Possibly these two ways of accounting for the error of Vitruvius' mistake should be combined. He makes no mention of the θεολογεῖον, and probably did not know its function. Finding his authorities giving its height at ten or twelve feet, he might refer for better understanding to existing theatres of the Cuiculum type. There the λογεῖον was of the height in question and so he was justified in a confusion between it and the θεολογεῖον.

[18] In his commentary on the Pandects, fol. cii. *verso* in the 1532 edition, Budé gives a sketch of the teaching by Fra Giocondo, and refers especially to Vitruvius: 'I had the good fortune to get, while reading that book, the help of a most rare preceptor, Jucundus the Friar, then king's architect, a man of consummate antiquarian lore. Not only by speech but with his pencil (graphidi) did he explain what we were seeking to understand. Those were the times when I emended my Vitruvius at my ease.'...For the testimony of Scaliger and others on this same point, see the *Supplementum ad Scriptores trium ordinum S. Francisci.* Rec. Lucas Waddingers, Rome, 1806.

tween the earlier and the later sense of proscenium. It is also possible that Fra Giocondo may have had two minds about the matter, though this is unlikely. Fra Giocondo would in fact have belied the times in which he lived if he had not kept the Roman theatre and the Roman stage before his pupils even when he was discoursing about the Greek stage. In



SKETCH-PLAN.

those days the centre of interest was in things Roman far more than it is now. Perhaps for that reason Vitruvius was easier of approach, and could more readily be explained in those days than in these. It is at least certain that, like the pupils of Fra Giocondo and like Bulengerus (*De Theatro*, 1603), Vitruvius was primarily concerned with things Roman. This is true in spite of a certain pedantry which inclined Vitruvius to suggest Greek

improvements,—as in the case of his Roman proscenii pulpitum. One of his very earliest and most competent critics, Politian's friend the Florentine architect Leo Battista Alberti, cleverly summed up the matter in 1485 by complaining that Vitruvius was Greek to the Romans and Roman to the Greeks. The one building of which we know Vitruvius to have been architect was in fact a Roman basilica. In the forties nearly twenty years after Friar Giocondo's death the Vitruvian academy at Rome went about with the most ambitious plans, and one thing which may be traced back to their schemes is undoubtedly the last building planned by Palladio, Fra Giocondo's townsman,—I mean the Roman stage begun at Verona three months before the great architect died in August 1580, and finished by his son in 1584. It stands to-day a monument of the study of Vitruvius in the 16th century.[19]

What very different results the latest study of Vitruvius has brought about, we have already seen. Instead of borrowing from contact with great public works, like those of Fra Giocondo at Paris, Rome, and in the Veneto, a broad and practised power of insight, recent expounders of this passage have too often cavilled about the words of Vitruvius. His use of the most innocent and everyday terms like *intervallum*,[20] *sinistram*, *dextram*, *centrum*, and *latitudo*, has been tormented, discussed, and strained first this way and then that way until their meaning has been fairly driven out of them. Geppert, Lemonius, Schönborn, Wecklein and Albert Mueller were too busy with one or the other of these words to heed the one plan which, so far as the stage is concerned, simply followed the straightforward meaning of Vitruvius' words. Schneider's plan is mentioned by no one with respect. Geppert laughed at it and Schoenborn lost his temper over it, but it remains for all that the most nearly faithful presentation of the Greek stage as Vitruvius described it which has appeared since the year 1523.[21]

The total inability of all others to agree in one interpretation of this passage in our author has meanwhile led to a feeling that it cannot be understood. Geppert began to despair of it, Lemonius also gives it up, and

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[19] Le fabbriche di Andrea Palladio, Ott. Bertozzi Scamozzi in Vicenza 1796.

[20] It is discouraging to find in the last number of the *Rheinisches Museum* (Vol. xlvi. Heft 3) a new attempt to conjure with the word *intervallum*. Schönborn was certain that it meant Parodos. Albert Müller could not believe this, but agreed that something very uncommon was to be got out of the word. So he consulted a mathematical expert, who revealed to him that its meaning at the end of the account of the Greek stage must be determined by the context in which it last occurred,—at the beginning of Vitruvius' account of the Roman stage. So they two agreed that it must mean one of the twelve equal segments into which the circle was divided by its inscribed squares. Müller selected the two segments which he found convenient. Now comes Fabricius and selects two others which suit his view. Oemichen may well be left in the field against all these over-ingenuities. His objections have not been and cannot be answered.

[21] Fra Giocondo's plans were reproduced,—unaccompanied however by the necessary marginal keys, and with no lettering whatever upon them—in the French translation of Jean Martin (1547). They were completely supplanted in 1556 by that prepared by Daniele Barbaro under advice from Palladio. Perrault followed Barbaro, and began the modern controversies where no account is ever taken of Giocondo's plans.

Dumon, in 1888, convicts Vitruvius,—at least so far as the Greek stage is concerned,—of ignorance, carelessness, and stupidity.

Therefore I maintain that it is time for us to break away from these tangles of German controversialists and to begin again, following the lead of Fra Giocondo as far as it will go with us. Since the task of bringing the statements about the Greek stage in Vitruvius to bear upon what we know of existing monuments is before us, we cannot perhaps do better than follow the example which that same Friar Ioannes, described as *animi humanitate vere Iocundus,* has set before us. His method is briefly given by himself in the dedication of his Vitruvius to Giuliano della Rovere, Pope Julius II. 'Take now, my ever blessed father, with favouring countenance,' he writes, 'these my accomplished labours,—Vitruvius, restored to the right rule of his original speech. But think not the toil has been slight. For in seeking to understand him I have compared his words and his meaning with the remnants of ruins and the fabrics of the ancients, and this not once only but often and many times again,—not without great exhaustion and abundant perspiration.'

LOUIS DYER.

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